



Pick Your Path to Health

Asian American Women and Depression

Silence can sometimes hurt or even kill. Asian American women who suffer from depression know this painful silence intimately. But dealing with depression for Asian American women can be as difficult as depression itself.

While identifying the exact cause of depression is difficult, there are many factors in Asian American women's lives that make them especially susceptible to depression. Research shows that anxiety, low self-esteem, social isolation, family pressure, problems with cultural adaptation, racism and discrimination, and language barriers may contribute to depression and prevent women from seeking medical services.

Women sometimes accept these signs as part of their life, but learning to identify these as serious signs of depression—which can lead to suicide—may be the first step in seeking help.

Living up to Standards

"Young Asian Americans, in particular, are facing a lot of pressure because they feel they need to live up to many standards," says Afton Hirohama with the National Asian Women's Health Organization (NAWHO) in San Francisco, California. A series of focus groups sponsored by NAWHO found that doing well in school; helping support the family; taking care of elderly family members, which may be part of young people's responsibilities; and maintaining a job are among the many pressures young Asian American women face.

The focus groups also found that Asian American women of all ages feel isolated. "If you talk about someone in your family having depression, it sounds as if you are saying something is wrong with your family," continues Hirohama. "Women talked about seeing other family members going through depression and not talking about it. That cycle of silence is one of the major issues for Asian American women."

Seeking Help

"Women are only seeking help when there's a major crisis. There are no preventive measures in place," says Hirohama. Services may be

underutilized because Asian American women don't discuss personal problems for fear of bringing shame to their families.

Even if Asian American women try to seek help, there are few resources. Finding adequate services is compounded by the ethnic diversity of Asian communities with varied cultural experiences. While many local ethnic organizations and churches offer support to Asian families, openly addressing the issue of depression and suicide is not necessarily a service provided.

Underreporting of depression and suicide complicates a lack of comprehensive data on depression and suicide among Asian Americans. Experts believe that the suicide rate of Asian American women ages 15 to 24 is second only to Native Americans and above whites, African Americans, and Hispanics. A report published by Women Against Gun Violence found that gun deaths attributed to suicide among Asians in Los Angeles County rose 93.8 percent in 1999.

Should I Seek Help

If you have ever considered seeking help, there are many reasons to do it today. Begin by calling local clinics to inquire about the types of services they offer. Ask for services in your native language if that makes you more comfortable. Feel free to continuously provide feedback to improve services. And remember:

- Your mental health is important.
- You don't have to deal with stress and isolation on your own.
- A counselor can help you deal with stress resulting from different factors such as cultural barriers.
- Don't wait for a crisis. Look for help early on.
- Encourage local ethnic organizations and churches serving your community to address the issue in workshops and regularly scheduled events.

Taking charge of your mental health will make you and your family stronger and will serve as an example for future generations. Learning to deal with such a difficult issue as depression will put you on a path to better health.

NAWHO is launching TAKE A CHANCE. TAKE CHARGE, a public awareness campaign for Asian American women and mental health. The campaign's brochure recognizes depression as a problem and suggests

where Asian American women can go for help. To hear more about the campaign or to order materials, contact Jennifer Stoll-Hadayia at 415-989-9747 or visit the Web site at <http://www.nawho.org>.

Pick Your Path to Health is a national public health education campaign sponsored by the Office on Women's Health within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. For more information about the campaign, please call 1-800-994-WOMAN or 1-888-220-5446 (TDD), or visit the National Women's Health Information Center at <http://www.4woman.gov/> To request weekly health tips by e-mail, click on the box that says, "Click Here for weekly health tips by e-mail."